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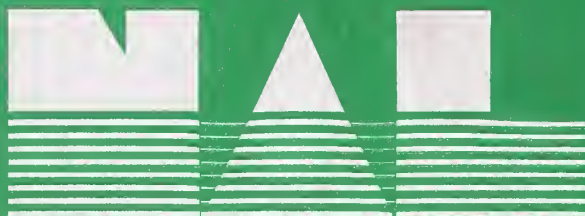
Food Safety  
and Inspection  
Service

March 1988

# Meat and Poultry Hotline Report Fiscal Year 1987



**United States  
Department of  
Agriculture**



**National Agricultural Library**

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## Summary

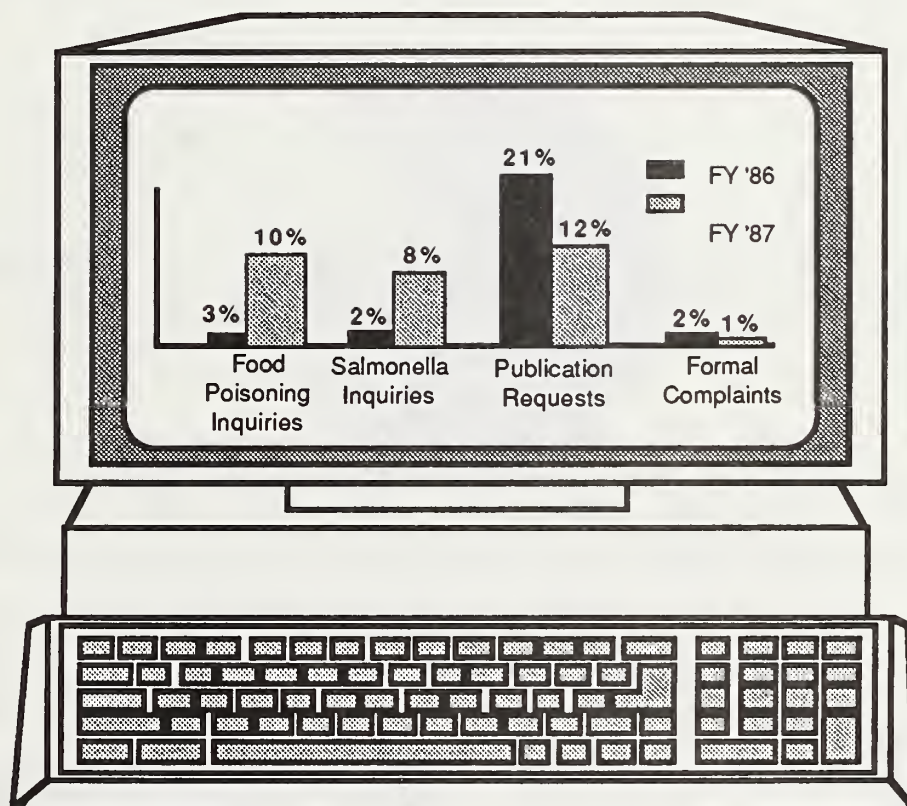
Throughout fiscal year 1987, consumers reaffirmed the need for the objective, coordinated food safety information provided by the Meat and Poultry Hotline. Seventy-five percent more (48,500)\* consumers called the hotline in FY 87 than in FY 86 (28,000 calls were received)\*\*. At this time, the number of callers helped is limited by staff and equipment.

As was the case last year, the typical hotline inquiry was from a consumer wanting very basic information on safe handling, preparation, and storage of meat and

poultry products (60 percent of all inquiries)\*\*\*. Interest in food poisoning bacteria, sparked by the media's focus on salmonella contamination, rose to 10 percent of all calls from 3 percent the first year. Eight percent of all callers asked about salmonella by name. Consumers calling just to order publications fell to 12 percent from 21 percent the first year, which reflects a better understanding of the hotline both by the media and consumers. The portion of callers with product complaints dropped to only 1 percent of all calls (2 percent of calls were complaints the first year). (See fig. 1, for major changes in hotline use.)

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**Figure 1. Comparison of Selected Hotline Inquiries by Topic: Fiscal Year 1986 and Fiscal Year 1987**



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\* Of the 48,500 people who called the hotline, 22,000 were helped by home economists during the operating hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time; 5,500 called the hotline during operating hours but hung up before they could be helped; and 21,000 called after hours and heard a taped educational message.

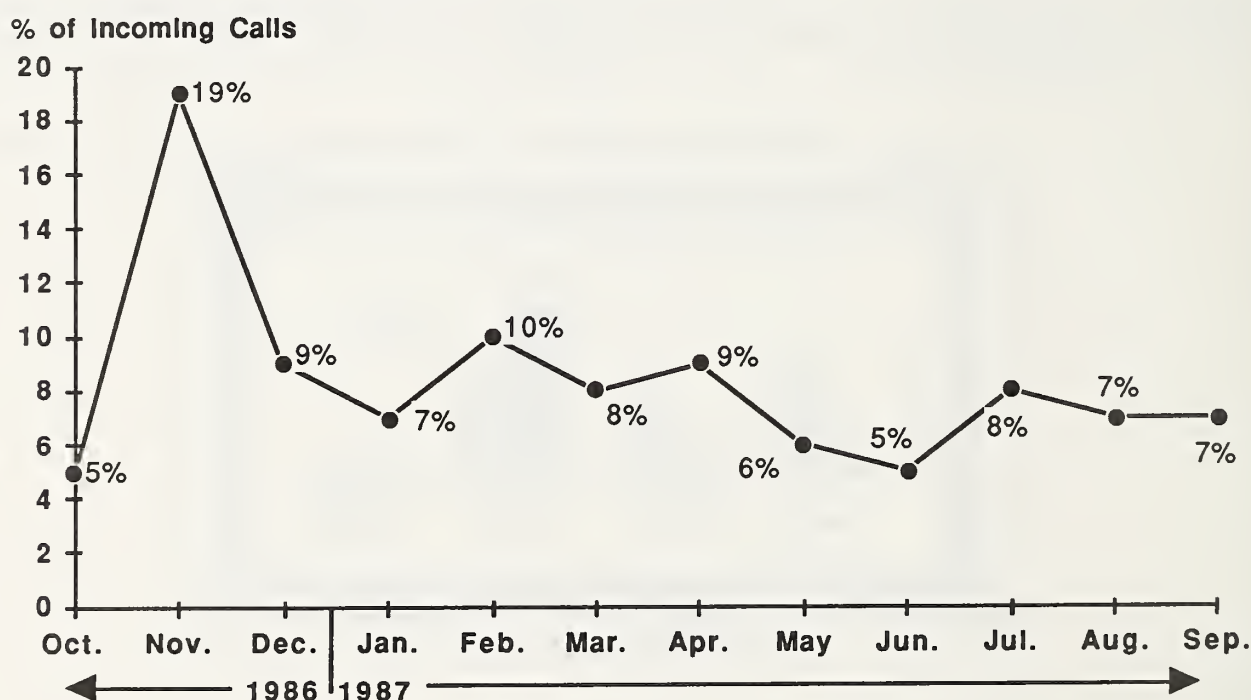
\*\* Of the 28,000 people who called the hotline, 14,500 were helped by home economists during the operating hours of 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Eastern Time; 3,000 called the hotline during operating hours but hung up before they could be helped; and 10,500 called after hours and heard a taped educational message.

\*\*\* Throughout the report, percentages are based on the 22,000 callers who spoke with home economists during operating hours, unless otherwise stated.

Calls were well distributed throughout the year. As anticipated, the demand for service peaked in November (19 percent of all calls were received) when consumers were preparing food for Thanksgiving. Two unexpected peaks also occurred. The first was in February after *The Los Angeles Times* and a CBS television affiliate in Los Angeles ran stories on salmonella in poultry. A second national surge in call volume occurred in April after "60 Minutes" aired a story on poultry inspection. (See

fig. 2 for a breakdown of incoming calls by month.) The Meat and Poultry Hotline was able to develop into an even more responsive, effective force against foodborne illness during FY 87, due to innovative staffing and ongoing training, computer system upgrades, and effective publicity. The hotline data base, which also has grown, has helped the Food Safety and Inspection Service and the food safety community better identify and target consumers' concerns and information gaps.

Figure 2. Breakdown of Calls Received by Month



## The Typical Hotline Call

### I. Who called the most?

Consumers continue to be the principal hotline users, accounting for 89 percent of all calls. As in the first year, other groups also took advantage of the service. The next highest category of users again was business persons (4 percent of the callers), followed by government employees (2 percent).

### II. What did callers want to know about?

Some 99 percent of inquiries were information requests. As a result of the media's focus on salmonella and poultry inspection, some consumers said they called the hotline for objective information on salmonella and how to prevent food poisoning caused by it. Other callers wanted to air their concerns and to be reassured that the chicken they buy is safe and wholesome. These accounted for many of the inquiries in the new subject category, "nonformal complaint." (A nonformal complaint usually concerns a general situation such as the appearance, dating, or labeling of a product and is not referred to the Meat-borne Hazard Control Center or Compliance Division for investigation.)



The number of formal complaints (162) decreased to approximately 1 percent of inquiries. Of the complaints received, 45 percent concerned alleged foreign objects in product. Some 22 percent of the complaints were suspected food poisoning cases. Another 11 percent were about the appearance of the product. Seven percent were complaints about the product's taste, odor, or contents. And, 15 percent were about various other concerns. These complaints were referred either to the FSIS Compliance Division or the Meat-borne Hazard Control Center for further investigation. (See fig. 3 for a breakdown of subject of hotline calls.)

**III. What type of product did callers ask about?**

Questions reflected the diversity of products available to consumers in the marketplace. Slightly more than

half of the 22,000 calls (53 percent) were about unprocessed, fresh, or frozen products. Some 18 percent were about a wide variety of processed meat and poultry products: prestuffed, deli, vacuum-packaged, ready-to-eat, smoked, extruded, canned, etc. Twenty-nine percent of callers did not ask about specific product types.

**IV. What species did callers ask about?**

This year, consumer interest in chicken edged out turkey as the most asked about species. Concern about salmonella contamination in poultry, which peaked once in February and again in April, skewed the year's calls toward chicken. However, turkey still generated the most calls during the fall and winter holiday season. (See fig. 4 for breakdown of calls by species.)

Figure 3. Breakdown of Questions Asked by Subject

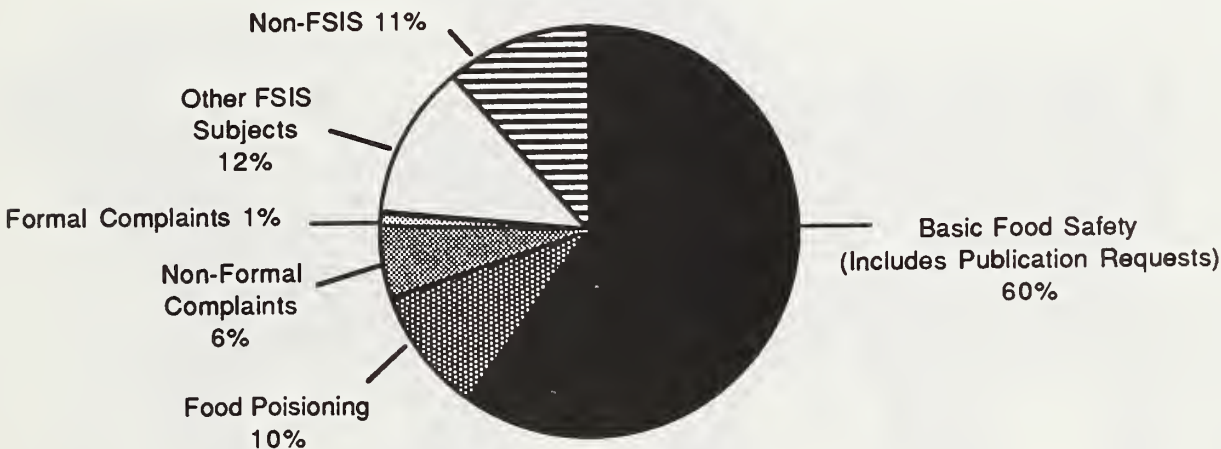
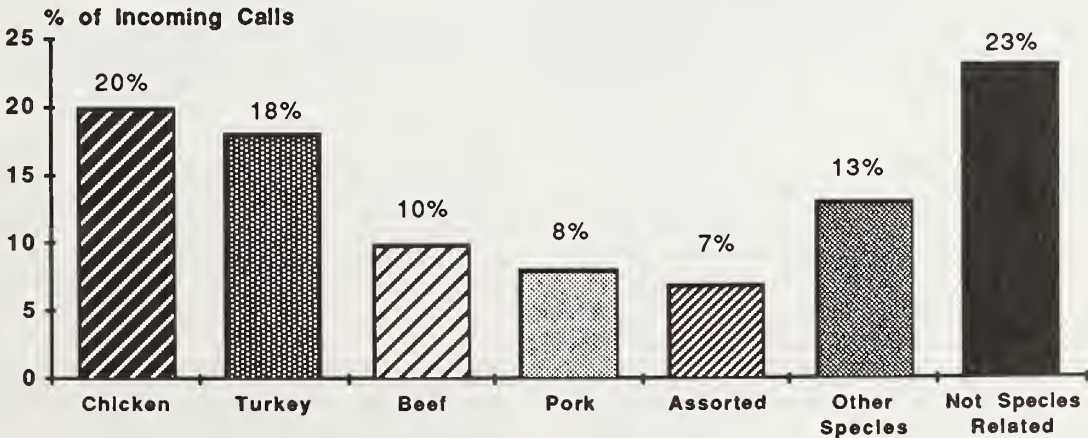


Figure 4. Breakdown of Questions Asked by Species



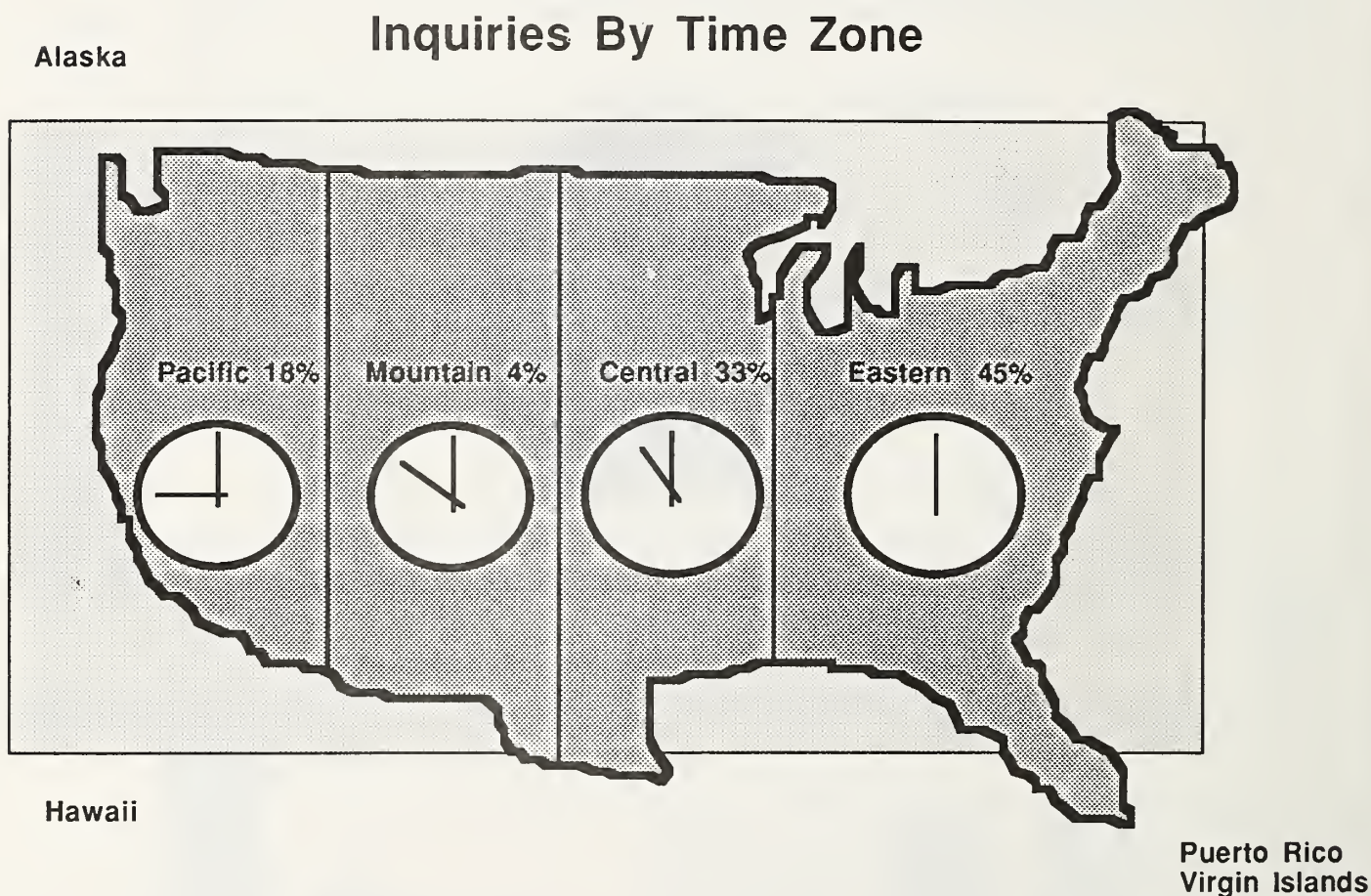
## V. What states did calls come from?

Inquiries were received from all 50 States, and Puerto Rico. More calls came from California (2,780) than any other State, followed by calls from New York (1,842). According to the Technical Assistance Research Programs (TARP) and the Naisbitt Group (firms which specialize in analyzing consumer response and social and economic trends), consumer hotlines receive more calls from people who live in California and New York because of their personality types, not because of the States' population density.

Consumers in New York and California tend to be action-oriented and most likely to use consumer services to express their concerns.

The largest portion of calls were generated in the Eastern time zone (45 percent). Hotline use, however, increased in the Pacific zone (up to 18 percent from 11 percent the first year). The proportion of calls from the Central (34 percent) and Mountain (4 percent) time zones was unchanged from the hotline's first year. (See fig. 5 for a breakdown of incoming calls by time zone.)

Figure 5. Breakdown of Calls Received by Time Zone





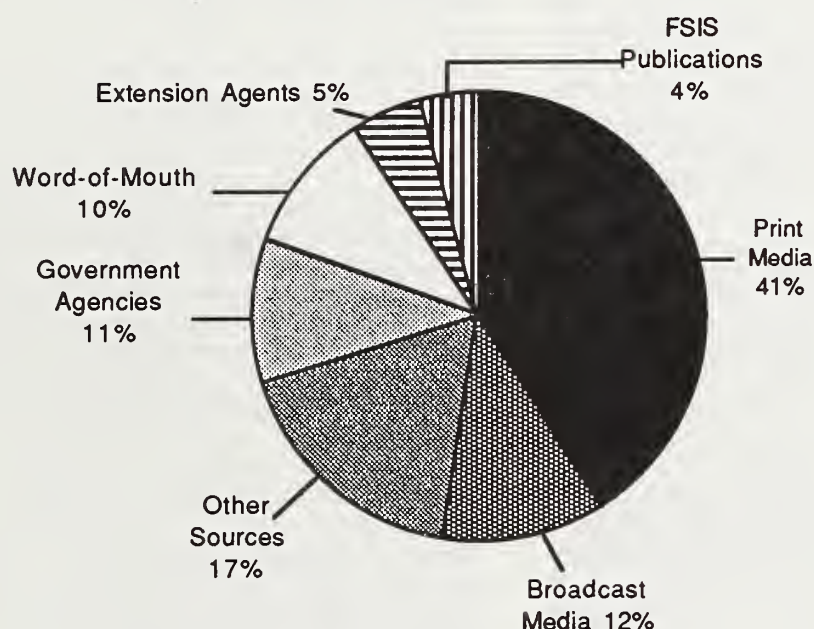
## VI. How did callers learn about the hotline?

For the second year in a row, media coverage of the Meat and Poultry Hotline provided more consumers with the hotline number than any other source. In FY 87, 53 percent of callers cited the media as their source for obtaining the hotline number. Media stories focused on food safety and listed the hotline as a resource for more information. In FY 86, 56 percent of callers cited the media when asked how they

obtained the hotline number, and stories focused on announcement of a new consumer service.

In addition to the media, consumers learned about the hotline in the following ways: from other government agencies (11 percent); word-of-mouth (10 percent); Extension Service (5 percent); FSIS publications (4 percent); and other sources (17 percent). (See fig. 6 for the sources of the hotline number cited by callers.)

Figure 6. Breakdown of Caller's Source for the Hotline Tollfree Number



### Meat and Poultry Hotline Publicity

The second year publicity took three forms—public service ads (the print ad “In a Stew Over Food Safety” and the radio ad “Ralph and Wanda”); the hotline number given as part of a food safety story; or a “filler” piece identifying the hotline as a source of food safety information.

Newspapers were the source of the hotline number for 26 percent of the callers. More than 1,150 different newspapers carried the hotline number during the year. This included such major dailies as:

*Arizona Republic;*  
*Atlanta Journal and Constitution;*  
*The Miami Herald;*  
*The Baltimore Sun;*  
*Boston Globe;*  
*Buffalo Evening News;*  
*Chicago Sun Times;*  
*Chicago Tribune;*  
*The Cincinnati Enquirer;*  
*Cleveland Plain Dealer;*  
*New York Daily News;*  
*Denver Post;*  
*Houston Post;*

*Detroit Free Press;*  
*Fresno Bee;*  
*The Hartford Courant;*  
*The Los Angeles Times;*  
*Milwaukee Journal;*  
*Newsday;*  
*New York Post;*  
*Orlando Sentinel;*  
*Providence (RI) Journal;*  
*Sacramento Bee;*  
*San Francisco Chronicle;*  
*Times-Picayune/States;*  
*USA Today;* and  
*The Washington Post.*

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Magazine mentions resulted in 13 percent of our calls. During the year, more than 240 magazines carried the hotline number, including:

<i>American Health;</i>	<i>Modern Maturity;</i>
<i>Consumer Digest;</i>	<i>Parents;</i>
<i>Consumer Reports;</i>	<i>Reader's Digest;</i>
<i>Discover;</i>	<i>Redbook;</i>
<i>Family Circle;</i>	<i>Woman's Day;</i>
<i>Glamour;</i>	<i>Working Mother; and</i>
<i>Good Housekeeping;</i>	<i>Working Woman.</i>
<i>Ladies Home Journal;</i>	

Radio and television announcements of the hotline resulted in 12 percent of our calls, and newsletters, 2 percent.

Following are three examples from the year of how media publicity on food safety affected calls to the hotline: First, in November 1986, virtually all newspapers and magazines across the country did a Thanksgiving food story, and many listed our hotline number as a resource. As a result, the percent of callers who listed these publications as the source of how they got our number rose to 63 percent from 39 percent for the year.

Second, in February 1987, the CBS affiliate in Los Angeles ran a five-part series on salmonella. After each segment the hotline number was listed. For the month of February, 31 percent of callers to the hotline listed television when asked how they got the hotline number. This compares to 8 percent for the year.

Third, in April 1987, CBS "60 Minutes" featured a segment on salmonella. The hotline number was not given. For that month, 27 percent of callers obtained the hotline number from referrals by government agencies such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Drug Administration, the Cooperative Extension Service, consumer protection offices, and health departments. During the year, these referrals accounted for 16 percent of incoming calls.

Since there is a direct relation between media publicity and calls to the Meat and Poultry Hotline, we may want to increase media contacts between May and September when hotline call volume drops.

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### Analyzing Hotline Information: Thanksgiving Preparations

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Thanksgiving 1986 brought a new array of questions from consumers about turkey. In an effort to save time, consumers were buying retail-stuffed cooked and uncooked turkey. Questions were raised about the safety and handling of these convenience products. While the immediate questions were

answered, we realized that the purchase of these and other convenience foods was a trend likely to continue and that information needed to be developed for consumers, the media, and the food industry.

A special task force of microbiologists, public affairs specialists, and home economists met to review information being given to consumers about these convenience turkey products and to develop guidelines for purchase and handling. Guidelines were developed and widely distributed in advance of Thanksgiving 1987. Presentations were made at three USDA-FDA Journalists' Conferences; feature articles and feature press releases were distributed to the print media; a series of five Video News Releases was distributed to television stations highlighting how to safely handle these products; and the guidelines were distributed to retail grocers through the Food Marketing Institute.

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### Fine Tuning the Hotline Operation

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In its second year, the hotline's organizational and management structure was elevated to a unit, headed by a supervisory home economist. A management analyst position also was created to better manage the hotline's large, automated data base and provide analytical support. By the end of FY 87, consumers' questions were being answered by two full-time, two part-time, and three intermittent home economists.

Because of its success as a high-tech consumer education service, the hotline has become a model for others planning hotlines. During the year, visitors from both the government and private sector toured the hotline: Proctor & Gamble, the National Agricultural Library, the Cooperative Extension Service, the U.S. Department of Commerce, and the Environmental Protection Agency.

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### Improved Service

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**I. Training.** Regularly scheduled and impromptu training has been key to the hotline's continued success. In preparation for Thanksgiving 1986, home economists were provided with training based on analysis of questions asked by consumers in 1985, new products, and trends reported by the media. Planning for Thanksgiving 1987 began during the 1986 holiday season. Often, FSIS scientists were called upon to brief the hotline staff when a new issue broke in the media. Hotline home economists were prepared to discuss even the most difficult issues with consumers: salmonella and poultry inspection, airsacculitis, irradiation, the new Chick-Chek test, etc.



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By the end of the year, a new training program was developed for newly hired hotline home economists using both videotaped and live presentations of subject-matter specialists.

**II. Information Resources Management.** To keep on the leading edge of consumer response technology, the hotline's automated information system was upgraded: computers at work stations were enhanced, data entry screens were streamlined, and data base software was upgraded. As a result, each inquiry in FY 88 can be processed a minimum of one-half minute faster. Based on FY 87 average number of calls per day (114), this results in a savings of 1 hour per day in processing time that can be used to answer more calls.

The accuracy of data collection was also improved to differentiate between an incoming call and multiple questions (inquiries) per call. Previously, if a caller asked three questions, the computer recorded the caller's state of residence, the source for the hotline number, and type of caller (consumer, business, etc.) three times. Now the data about the caller is recorded once and information about the questions asked is recorded separately. The system was also programmed to identify what percent of questions required research and the number of "nonformal complaints" (those not requiring referral to Compliance Division or the Meat-borne Hazard Control Center for further investigation). A new survey screen was developed to allow for automated survey data collection and analysis. Plans were developed to automate the data base of research collected by the home economists in response to complex questions.

Initial steps were taken to cable the hotline's computer work stations into a communications network. When completed in FY 88, this will speed up call processing time even more and will increase access to the hotline data base.

These improvements in information resources management result in better feedback to management for evaluation.

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### Value of the Hotline Data Base

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After 2 years of operation, the hotline's automated data base is an invaluable resource of information on the food safety concerns of the American public. This year, the data base was used extensively to:

1. Provide statistics and anecdotal information for speeches given at the USDA-FDA Journalists' Conferences;

2. Develop articles for the FSIS magazine, *Food News For Consumers*, which responded to consumers' concerns;
3. Target educational campaigns;
4. Measure response to the hotline number on recall releases; and
5. Analyze concerns expressed by consumers about salmonella.

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### Room for Improvement

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A combination of factors, particularly the number of phone lines, staff, equipment and space, limits the hotline's ability to meet consumers' demand for the service. For example, in FY 87, 55,000 calls could not get through because all the incoming lines were busy. (Research indicates that 55,000 busy signals does not equal 55,000 callers because people try more than once to get through.) Another 5,500 callers who reached the hotline and were put on hold while all the home economists were busy hung up after waiting an average of 1 minute and 47 seconds. Both of these numbers are considered too high by industry standards for hotlines.

During the 1986 Thanksgiving season, 5,400 people called for help when the hotline was closed (before 10 a.m. EST, after 4 p.m. EST, weekends and holidays). On Thanksgiving Day, a Federal holiday, 1,100 callers sought help. Upon reviewing this data the hours of operation were extended 2 hours per day to assist more callers during the 1987 Thanksgiving season.

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### Conclusion

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After more than 2 years of tollfree service, the hotline has educated more than 105,000 callers. We have learned that consumers increasingly want and need basic information about food safety. The food safety community as a whole also has reflected this need by using the hotline as a national source of accurate, up-to-the-minute food safety information.

As it grows and continues to serve a larger audience, the hotline will still focus on providing a quality service. The hotline's major objectives will continue to be providing answers to immediate questions while also working to prevent future problems.





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## MEAT AND POULTRY HOTLINE STAFF

*photo left (from left to right, top to bottom)*

**Barbara Fleet**, home economist, has been answering calls on the Meat and Poultry Hotline since September 1986. An interest in computers has led to the additional assignment of information support assistant to the management analyst, preparing monthly statistical reports on incoming calls. Ms. Fleet has a B.S. degree in institutional management from the University of Maryland and an M.B.A. from the University of South Mississippi. She has ten years of experience as a hospital registered dietitian, including an internship at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. She is from Long Beach, Calif.

**Diane Van Lonkhuyzen**, home economist, has a varied background in the field of home economics which includes a position as consumer advisor to a major utility company in the Washington, D.C. area. For nine years she ran a test kitchen developing recipes for the company's cookbook, and conducting cooking and energy conservation demonstrations in the community. Ms. Van Lonkhuyzen has also served as a consultant to numerous appliance manufacturers. She has been with the hotline since September 1986, and has a B.S. degree in home economics from the University of Maryland.

**Jene Springrose** joined the hotline staff in October 1987. She has extensive experience working in industry test kitchens and staffing hotlines. She previously worked for the Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service and has taught both community education and in vocational technical schools. Originally from Minnesota, Ms. Springrose graduated with distinction from the University of Minnesota with a degree in home economics (food science, nutrition, and adult education), and is currently working on a master's degree. In addition to working on the Meat and Poultry Hotline, she is developing recipes and collaborating on the publication of an international cookbook.

**Jody Siegel** is the Meat and Poultry Hotline management analyst and data base manager. In this capacity she is responsible for analyzing calls that come into the hotline to identify trends and to determine new areas in need of consumer education. Ms. Siegel also manages the hotline's automated systems. Originally, from New York City, Ms. Siegel holds a M.S. degree in nutrition with an emphasis in quantitative research methods from the University of Maryland and a B.A. degree in biological sciences from George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. Before joining the hotline in 1985 as a home economist, Ms. Siegel worked in the field of academic administration at universities in Maryland and Virginia.

**Linda Burkholder**, home economist, brings six years experience as a home economics teacher in public schools to her position on the Meat and Poultry Hotline. She received a degree in home economics from James Madison University in Virginia and a master's degree in nutrition education and human services from Hood College in Maryland. In addition to working on the hotline, Ms. Burkholder also teaches food preparation at the college level. She is a native of Maryland.

**Karen Tracey**, home economist, has been answering Meat and Poultry Hotline calls since 1986 when she moved to Washington from Kansas where she taught secondary home economics for eight years. In addition to answering hotline calls, Ms. Tracey serves as the hotline training manager, working on the design and development of training materials for hotline staff. She has a B.S. degree in vocational home economics education from Central Missouri State University. Upon graduation, she worked for the city of Independence (Mo.) Youth Employment/Life Skills Program. Ms. Tracey is currently pursuing a master's degree.

**Ruth Welch**, home economist, and a native of Iowa, attended the university of Illinois where she received a B.S. degree in home economics. She is also a registered dietitian with a master's degree in institution management. Her career experience includes positions in hospital dietetics as well as public health and community nutrition.

**Bessie Jones Berry**, home economist, has been with the Meat and Poultry Hotline since June 1986. In addition to answering calls, she is the hotline research and product complaint manager. She has a B.S. degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, and a master's degree in consumer affairs from Howard University in Washington, D.C., that included an internship in the White House Office of Consumer Affairs. She has taught foods and nutrition in the public schools. Ms. Berry is originally from Guthrie, Oklahoma.



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**Susan Templin**, as supervisor of the Meat and Poultry Hotline, is responsible for directing the activities of 10 full-time, part-time, and on-call home economists who answer the phones, and a management analyst. She serves as a media spokesperson for the Meat and Poultry Hotline, featured on radio and television programs, and is often quoted in newspaper and magazine articles. Prior to joining the hotline in 1985 as a home economist, she was director of sales for a food company. She also has ten years of experience in retail store management and has supervised a USDA-sponsored day care nutrition program. Ms. Templin, who has a degree in home economics from the University of Maryland, has also conducted cooking and microwave-use classes.

**Marilyn Johnston**, home economist, received a B.S. degree in home economics from Purdue University in Indiana and worked as a home economist for several public utilities in that State before moving to the Washington, D.C. area. She has extensive knowledge of microwave cooking having taught classes for the past ten years. In addition to answering hotline calls, she is working on publishing a cookbook.

**Dr. Georgia Stevens**, hotline advisor, researches emerging food safety issues that arise from calls to the Meat and Poultry Hotline and serves as media spokesperson about the hotline and how consumers should safely handle food in the home. She worked for ten years as a state extension specialist in Nebraska and Maryland. This involved lecturing and teaching through newspaper, television and professional workshop forums. Dr. Stevens holds degrees in home economics education, family economics and consumer affairs from the Universities of Nebraska and Maryland.

**Marilyn Mower**, home economist, brings a varied career path to her position on the Meat and Poultry Hotline. She has served as director of test kitchens for a public relations firm and assistant food editor at Parents magazine. In addition to working on the hotline, she is also director of the dietetics program at Hood College in Frederick, Maryland. Her education background includes a B.S. degree in foods and nutrition from Syracuse University, and graduate work, including doctoral studies, at New York University. Ms. Mower was born and raised in New York.



# **In A Stew Over Food Safety?**

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